



## RESPONSES TO INFORMATION REQUESTS (RIRs)

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**BLR100649.E**

Belarus: The treatment of members of the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) and the availability of state protection for them (2001 - 2005)

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### The Belarusian Popular Front

The Belarusian Popular Front (BPF), established in 1988 (*Europa World Year Book 2005* 2005, 751; Belarusian Popular Front 29 Dec. 2000), was one of the largest opposition political parties in Belarus throughout the 1990s (RFE/RL 16 Dec. 2002a). In 1999, the party split into two wings (*Political Handbook of the World 2000-2002* 2004, 100): the Belarusian Popular Front, also referred to as the Belarusian National Front (*Europa World Year Book 2005* 2005, 751; *Country Reports 2004* 28 Feb. 2005), and the Conservative Christian Party of the Belarusian Popular Front (or Conservative Christian Party of the Belarusian National Front) (*Europa World Year Book 2005* 2005, 751; *Political Handbook of the World 2000-2002* 2004, 100). There is also an active youth faction of the BPF (UN 7 June 2005; AP 19 Apr. 2002).

### Treatment of Members of the Belarusian Popular Front

According to Freedom House's country report on Belarus, the Belarusian Popular Front is one of several organizations whose leaders and activists have been "harassed and impeded" by Belarusian authorities (Freedom House 11 Aug. 2005, 73).

Members of the party have been arrested and have received jail terms for their participation in a number of "unauthorized" protests (RFL/RL 17 June 2003; *ibid.* 23 July 2004; AP 25 Mar. 2003). In March 2002, a leader of the party received a jail term of 15 days for planning an "unauthorized" march (RFE/RL 29 Mar. 2002), while a deputy chairman of another branch was sentenced to 10 days in jail for his participation in a demonstration in July of the same year (*ibid.* 9 Sept. 2002). A demonstration in March 2003 celebrating the anniversary of the Belarusian National Republic resulted in the arrest of several members of the BPF, including the party's leader, Vintsuk Vyachorka, who received a jail term of 10 days (*Country Reports 2003* 25 Feb. 2004, Sec.2.b.; RFE/RL 27 Mar. 2003; *ibid.* 28 Mar. 2003). In June 2005, a sentence of two years of "restricted freedom" was handed out to Pavel Sevryarnets, a leader of the youth wing of the Belarusian Popular Front, for his involvement in organizing a demonstration protesting the results of the country's parliamentary elections and referendum in 2004 (UN 7 June 2005).

According to Amnesty International, in Belarus "[l]eading members of the opposition, human rights defenders and journalists who voice criticism risk criminal charges for slandering the President" (AI 15 Dec. 2004). In December 2002, Viktor Ivashkevich, the deputy chairman of the BPF and editor of an independent newspaper, received a sentence of two years of "restricted freedom" for the publication of an article "defaming" President Lukashenka (RFE/RL 16 Dec. 2002b).

In September 2005, Belarusian police blocked four activists, including two members of the BPF and one member of the Conservative Christian Party of the BPF, on the road to a funeral (*Charter 97* 15 Sept. 2005). One BPF activist claimed he was prevented from attending the funeral in order to prevent him from criticizing the authorities in a speech at the burial service (*ibid.*).

There are reports that members of the BPF have had their names removed from ballots during election processes and have been prevented from registering as candidates (AP 2 Mar. 2003; RFE/RL 15 Oct. 2004; *ibid.* 7 Oct. 2004). In March 2003, one member was removed from the ballot for "insulting the president" during his campaign, in which he showed opposition films (AP 2 Mar. 2003). In the same year, another member was prevented from registering as a candidate in the election for not declaring "24,000 rubles ([US]\$12) in his income declaration" (RFE/RL 28 Feb. 2003). In 2004, a BPF member's name was removed from the ballot for the distribution of flyers that did not show "imprint data" (*ibid.* 15 Oct. 2004), while another member was removed for allegedly making "defamatory" statements about Belarusian officials over the radio (*ibid.* 7 Oct. 2004).

In October 2004, a local BPF office and the apartment of a deputy head of the BPF were broken into: office equipment containing information about the organization's activities was stolen (Viasna Human Rights Centre 1

Nov. 2004). In May 2005, the Belarusian Popular Front party was notified that they needed to vacate their headquarters since "governmental agencies needed the property" (RFE/RL 5 May 2005). The deputy chairman of the party stated that

[s]ince the office has long been bugged, we thought that we would be allowed to stay so that the authorities would be able to find out about our plans....[This] is evidence that the authorities are no longer interested in listening; they have opted for an increasingly open conflict and crackdown, ignoring respect for any formal attributes of civilized practices (ibid).

Amnesty International has expressed concern regarding several "disappearances" of leading opposition figures and a television cameraman in Belarus in 2000 that have remained unsolved (AI 25 May 2005). In 2002, Yury Korban, the vice-chair of the BPF's Vitsebsk city branch, disappeared "under unexplained circumstances" (IHF 2003, 10). Korban's family alleges that his disappearance was for political reasons and suspects the involvement of the authorities (ibid.; Prima News Agency 16 May 2002).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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**Oral Source:** The Belarusian Helsinki Committee did not provide information within the time constraints of this Response.

**Internet sites, including:** Central Asia Caucasus Institute, Former Soviet Union Monitor, Institute of War and Peace Reporting, International Federation of Human Rights, Transitions Online, United Kingdom (UK), U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, World News Connection.

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